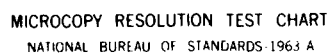


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## ON THRESHOLDS IN SOVIET MILITARY THOUGHT

Benjamin S. Lambeth

March 1983

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ON THRESHOLDS IN SOVIET MILITARY THOUGHT

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INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1960s, American strategic theory has dwelled heavily on the question of conflict "thresholds" and their significance in determining the advisability of various U.S. options in crises. This approach has been part of a broader American tendency to regard military power as a bargaining tool for selectively influencing adversary behavior in circumstances where the destructiveness of nuclear weaponry has ruled out more undisciplined modes of force employment. Its object has been to identify distinct levels in the scope and intensity of violence whose manipulation might influence an adversary's crisis decisionmaking and thus capitalize on his reluctance to assume escalatory risks. The quintessential example of this fixation was Herman Kahn's classic escalation ladder, which depicted 44 discrete "rungs" of interstate violence ranging from prewar crisis maneuvering to full-blown, insensate nuclear war. Although largely untested in practice, the intellectual premises that inspired this and similar notions have exerted a major influence on U.S. strategic concepts, not only for European and other regional contingencies but also for direct conflict with the Soviet Union.

This paper reflects on how the Soviets have come to think about "thresholds" in their own strategic planning. Such an inquiry is important for two reasons. First, any U.S. strategy aimed at influencing Soviet behavior through a combination of measured action and threats of graver moment must be based on at least some appreciation

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\* This paper is an edited text of remarks presented at a conference on "Strategic Response to Conflict in the 1980s" sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., September 22-23, 1982.

of Soviet sensitivity levels and the kinds of Western military moves the Soviet leadership would be inclined to regard as intolerable. Second, even if we stipulate the Soviet leaders' willingness in principle to indulge in slow-motion escalation games (itself a questionable proposition), it is important to know whether they will recognize our "rules of engagement" and interpret our intentions correctly. Without confidence that the Soviet Union was operating on a common wavelength, we could run substantial risk of playing to a particular "threshold" of one sort or another that was entirely a construct of our own imagination. A case in point might involve our launching of a single ICBM into an unpopulated part of the Soviet Union during an intense crisis in an effort to demonstrate American "resolve" and warn the Soviets to desist from further military action. If the other side failed to perceive the intended purpose of such a demonstration or were unable to distinguish it from less discriminate measures, any attempt to raise the stakes of conflict by intimidating the adversary through seemingly controlled escalation management could backfire and produce catastrophic results.

Obviously, any inquiry of this sort must be heavily qualified at the outset. For one thing, the secrecy surrounding all matters of an operational nature in the Soviet Union makes it difficult to discern the real pattern of authoritative thinking that lies behind the facade of Soviet declaratory rhetoric. If Soviet "doctrine" as it relates to thresholds is taken to include explicit force employment plans, attack schedules, escalatory options, and related considerations of a specific military nature, we can say little about its content simply because those individuals who would ultimately determine the issue of war and peace do not make it a practice to discuss such matters outside the private councils of Soviet strategic planning. What little we have to go on must be drawn from the published body of Soviet commentary on military strategy. By and large, this material is written by military academics rather than by military professionals. Furthermore, it serves many purposes besides describing and explicating Soviet operational concepts. These include educating the Soviet officer

corps, justifying Soviet military programs in the internal bureaucratic and budgetary arena, and manipulating foreign perceptions of Soviet military prowess, among other things. Although it would clearly be wrong to describe this material as intentional disinformation, it offers at best only a rough-grained portrait of Soviet thought about the probable character of a future nuclear war. True, it illuminates some important Soviet predispositions about defense born of years of history, tradition, and practice. As such, it has its place in helping to separate U.S. strategies that might work from those that would most likely prove futile. Beyond that, however, Soviet military writings contain very little of a hard predictive nature regarding how the Soviet High Command might respond to various U.S. and NATO military initiatives.

Second, even where Soviet writings do offer a measure of specificity, they do not address the "thresholds" issue within the same frame of reference that most Western defense specialists are accustomed to. The idiom of Soviet military thought employs language and logic quite dissimilar from that of the West. Accordingly, we are left with little choice but to draw informed inferences about how the Soviets think about thresholds. Furthermore, while Soviet doctrine *does* stipulate an accepted image of nuclear war (featuring such familiar themes as surprise, momentum, preemption, combined-arms employment, the feasibility of victory, and so on), it provides nothing in the way of a reliable forecast of future Soviet military conduct. At bottom, these Soviet "principles of war" are little more than general prescriptions for an ideal world. Although they tell us a great deal about peacetime Soviet operational proclivities, they are scarcely binding on Soviet political leaders and combat commanders. Neither would feel compelled in a crisis to blindly carry out doctrinal edicts that ran against common sense, and both have abundant capacity to improvise (albeit in uniquely "Soviet" fashion) as circumstances warrant.

Nevertheless, as well as we can gather from the indicators available, Soviet thought on the question of "thresholds," like Soviet military theory in general, derives from a distinctive mind-set whose terms of reference are quite different from our own. The following discussion

will review what appear to be the principal conflict "thresholds" in Soviet military thinking, identify the more notable contrasts between these views and those that have long held sway in the United States, and finally touch on some of their implications for Western strategic planning.

#### SOVIET VIEWS ON GRADATIONS OF CONFLICT

One periodically senses a strain of thought--doubtless unconscious--in American strategic discourse which implies that "mere" conventional war can be countenanced with relative equanimity and that only when the nuclear threshold is breached does the situation acquire the full gravity traditionally assigned to military showdowns. Whether this tendency stems from our lack of experience at combat on our own soil since the Civil War, our short memory of World War II, or our recollection of Korea and Vietnam as political-military games that were not played for ultimate stakes, it pervades much of the American literature on strategic matters, particularly those writings that portray nuclear weapons as the critical factor affecting the livelihood of the international community. It is a strain of thought, one might add, that evokes profound unease among our West German allies, whose principal nightmare is the specter of a superpower war waged solely in the NATO Center Region, with each side's homeland remaining a sanctuary from combat operations.

For the Soviets, by contrast, the key threshold is not nuclear employment but *war itself*, irrespective of its geographic setting, level of intensity, or type of weapons used. For good historical reason, the Soviet leaders approach war with deadly seriousness and reject any idea that it can be played at with less than full determination. Their attitude on this score is akin to the proposition that one does not hit a king in the face unless one is prepared to kill him. Seen from this vantage point, Western intimations that limited wars can be carefully stage-managed "on the cheap" are reflective more of academic salon musings than of sober military deliberation. Since the Soviets are risk-averse by disposition and constantly fear the prospect



of losing control of events, *any* confrontation in which the forces of the opposing superpowers are directly engaged must be viewed with the utmost concern and managed with appropriate dispatch.

In the ongoing defense debate, one frequently hears allusions to the notion that the Soviet leadership "thinks it can fight and win a nuclear war." Although well-founded in spirit, such assertions are considerable overstatements of reality. The Soviet refrain that victory in war--even in nuclear war--is feasible is merely an operational imperative, not a prediction or a reflection of underlying Soviet confidence. Whatever their doctrinal exhortations may suggest, Soviet leaders are no more assured that victory would be achievable in practice than their American counterparts or anybody else. For them, war of *any* sort is to be avoided with every effort unless circumstances rule out less uncompromising alternatives. It follows that once the war is on, however it may have been precipitated or whatever its underlying issues might be, the Soviets must prosecute it with every means necessary to produce a favorable outcome in the shortest possible time.

Given this predisposition, Soviet leaders are not likely to be impressed by such refined threats as nuclear demonstrations, "limited sanctuary attacks," counterforce-only strikes, or any other such recondite niceties that figure so prominently in American strategic theory. Their main concern attaches to the simpler notion of what Thomas Schelling has termed "just plain war." Ideally, their preference is to pursue the *fruits* of victory without having to resort to combat in the first place. Both their ideological conservatism and their historical tendency toward patience will incline them strongly to withhold the critical initial move in any circumstance where forceful preemption might be safely left to await another day. But should they ever find themselves in a situation comparable to August 1914, in which they felt that war was definitely coming and were persuaded that continued inaction would carry greater long-term risks than *some* sort of bold initiative, they would feel powerful compulsions to nip unravelling events in the bud with whatever measures they felt appropriate (including massive employment of nuclear weapons, if necessary) without much agonizing

over adversary "sensitivity levels" or how Soviet actions might relate to some hypothetical "escalation ladder." In sum, the threshold of principal significance to the Soviets does not lie *within* the war process but rather involves the fundamental question of whether or not to go to war in the first place. Once that decision is made, all preexisting rules of coercive diplomacy will most likely become displaced in Soviet planning by the operational injunction to make the best of a highly undesirable set of circumstances through timely application of appropriate military measures.

This does not mean, of course, that the Soviets would feel inexorably committed to unrestrained global nuclear war in such a situation. On the contrary, they expressly recognize that war can remain localized to the contested theater should adversary forbearance permit it. Both their doctrinal literature and their normal peacetime status of forces indicate an underlying Soviet belief that any war--whatever its ultimate proportions--would most likely begin as a local confrontation, whether in Europe or in some other contested area such as the Persian Gulf. In contrast to some 50 percent of the U.S. Navy's SSBN fleet, only a handful of Soviet missile submarines are deployed on operational patrol at any given moment. Similarly, the Soviet long-range bomber force does not possess a quick-reaction launch capability anything like that routinely maintained by the U.S. Strategic Air Command. While these illustrations are clearly a revealing testament to the depth of Soviet concern over nuclear command and control, they also attest to the Soviet leadership's abiding disbelief that any global war would be triggered by a "bolt from the blue," without ample warning to bring Soviet forces up to a fully-generated alert posture. So beyond the fundamental "war vs. no-war" threshold, Soviet officials also recognize a distinction between local and general wars.

Furthermore, short of an unrestricted global nuclear exchange, a local or theater war could expand in a variety of ways. Either super-power could feel driven to put pressure on the other in a noncontiguous area by some "horizontal escalation" gesture aimed at compensating for faltering performance in a primary confrontation elsewhere. Whether

the Soviets would be inclined to view such horizontal escalation as a crossing of some distinctively salient "threshold" or merely as a further compounding of the existing operational situation is not clear. There are indications, however, that the Soviets do accept the possibility of superpower wars remaining limited to local and theater (even multitheater) arenas, including war at sea, short of uncontrolled nuclear cataclysm. They also recognize the possibility of a two-front war involving both NATO and China. Indeed, they have come to feel increasing concern over this possibility in recent years, as the Chinese have further deepened their adversary relationship with the Soviet Union and moved closer toward shared geostrategic interests with the United States and its allies. This concern has been underscored by the formation of an independent Soviet Far East Theater of Military Operations (TVD) aimed at providing a standing capability for dealing with a possible Chinese contingency without the need for drawing down Soviet forces committed against NATO. None of this provides much ground for comfort for U.S. and NATO planners, however, since the Soviets show little confidence that such theater wars could remain limited for long--particularly if nuclear weapons were to become involved. In such circumstances, they remain inclined to believe that the adversary would eventually be driven by desperation to raise the ante with large-scale theater or intercontinental nuclear strikes, in which case massive Soviet preemption would be the only appropriate countermeasure.

Finally, the Soviets probably recognize a distinction between wars fought for limited gains and those conducted for more all-inclusive goals. The evidence here is slender, but one can imagine conflict scenarios in which the Soviets could be quite satisfied with achieving relatively modest geopolitical objectives. Such a situation, of course, would very much be a function of how the war was initiated in the first place. The Soviets routinely assert that any full-fledged global war involving the superpowers would constitute a "decisive" clash between the opposing social systems. In any such war, Soviet combat efforts would presumably be directed toward uncompromising goals: continued survival of the Soviet state, complete Soviet dominance of the Eurasian periphery, and elimination of the United States as a significant player in international

affairs. Yet the Soviets could also find themselves committed to a conventional war in Europe that grew out of some remote-area conflict, in which the main stakes were Soviet alliance cohesion and *amour propre* rather than Soviet survival itself. In such an event, however improbable, Soviet leaders might be quite content to achieve a prompt and decisive *fait accompli*, such as capturing a major part of West Germany. Although this is purely speculative, it is not inconceivable that the Soviet military even has selective contingency plans (a France withhold option, for example, or a Germany-only invasion plan) expressly tailored for such situations. In light of the Soviet doctrinal emphasis on maintaining the initiative and constantly striving for the quick kill with whatever means necessary to attain established war objectives, one would not expect the Soviets to observe contrived restraints on the type of weapons or intensity of fire employed to pursue these limited goals. But the possibility of Soviet combat operations aimed at selective (as opposed to "historically decisive") terms of settlement is more than simply conceptual and should be kept in mind in thinking about alternative modes of Soviet force application.

#### CONTRASTS IN U.S. AND SOVIET PERSPECTIVES

Perhaps the main point to be emphasized regarding Soviet attitudes toward "thresholds" is that Soviet defense planners simply do not preoccupy themselves with (or, in many cases, even recognize) the sort of refined distinctions among levels and varieties of armed conflict that so heavily pervade Western strategic discussions. More to the point, they regard such notions as "escalation ladders" and comparable artifacts of Western discourse with a combination of bemusement and contempt. At bottom, their inclination is to view these formulations as products of misplaced scholasticism on the part of naive civilian defense intellectuals, who neither understand war nor treat important defense issues with the sort of seriousness they properly warrant. For them, the purpose of military power is not to "manipulate perceptions," "manage crises," or otherwise play games at the edge of war but simply to underwrite key Soviet national security interests for which lesser means--such as

diplomacy and coercive persuasion--have proven unavailing. In practice, this means the Soviets are not likely to be much inclined to respect thresholds governing the intensity of military commitment, even though they may be perfectly prepared to recognize distinctions among various objectives for which military forces might be employed.

Seen from a different perspective, the Soviet approach appears primarily oriented toward practical rather than theoretical contrasts among variants of weapons use. Most of the escalation concepts and associated "thresholds" that figure in U.S. writings are based on abstract distinctions among levels of violence, types of weapons, or extent of combat involvement--all more or less irrespective of what the war is about and how closely it impinges on the core interests of the major participants. For example, we routinely attach great importance to the so-called "firebreak" separating conventional from nuclear force employment, as though nuclear use in itself--rather than the motivations and consequences of that use--were the overriding concern. We also typically fractionate the overall war into neat conceptual packages, without much attention to how events in one category might relate to--and affect--events in all the others. The classic example is the disproportionate stress given in U.S. defense debates to the massive ICBM exchange, as though this episodic duel were somehow coextensive with World War III itself. As my Rand colleague James Thomson has rightly pointed out, the stereotypical "counterforce exchange" is merely a tactical event. However unprecedented its destructive effects might be for both sides, it may or may not, by itself, determine the ultimate outcome of the war. This perspective is almost certainly shared by senior Soviet commanders and planners.

Beyond the intercontinental missile exchange, American defense analysts also indulge in detailed and often heavily quantitative manipulation of scenarios alternatively oriented toward conventional war in Europe, theater nuclear campaigns, tactical air warfare, and war at sea--as though these were somehow independent and hermetically-sealed processes. All too often, studies that concentrate on any one of these dimensions of warfare remain indifferent to all the others

and to how they might interact in determining the ultimate resolution of the issues at stake. Instead, we treat these distinctive categories of fighting as set-piece confrontations of forces against forces, without adequate attention to their broader contextuality. By contrast, the Soviets tend to view war as a seamless web consisting of *all* elements of combat necessary to respond to the operational challenge and produce the desired results.

Probably the most notable distinction between American and Soviet approaches to the "thresholds" issue relates to the question of conventional versus nuclear use. Soviet military thinkers ascribe less salience to the nuclear threshold than we do in the West. To be sure, they scarcely view the specter of nuclear war with equanimity and clearly appreciate both the unprecedented damage and grave escalatory risks that would attend any nuclear weapons use. Nevertheless, while they will make every effort to avoid needless initiation of nuclear strikes, their decision to cross that threshold will be governed primarily by studied contemplation of the costs of *not* doing so rather than by any thoughts regarding the supposedly "unique" properties of nuclear weapons themselves.

After all, Soviet doctrine and tradition have long treated nuclear weapons merely as extensions of conventional firepower. This does not mean that Soviet planners blithely equate nuclear weapons with conventional artillery. It does mean, however, that any Soviet decision to use nuclear weapons in an escalating war would probably not be vexed by the sort of agonizing over the stigma of letting the nuclear genie out of the bottle that has characteristically influenced Western deliberations about the nuclear option. Instead, their principal criterion would be strictly utilitarian and would turn primarily on the question of whether or not the gain was worth the risk. It bears repeating that the key threshold for Soviet planners is the initiation of war itself, not the use of any particular weapon in any particular manner of targeting. Once the war is on, the Soviets will presumably have already decided that the game justified the gamble and will have reconciled themselves to calling on *whatever* means of combat they felt were required to accomplish those objectives for which the engagement was joined in the first place.

This contrast between American and Soviet views is of more than simply academic significance. A guaranteed recipe for disaster would be a crisis in which Western decisionmakers wrongly persuaded themselves that the thresholds they themselves attached importance to were equally respected by their Soviet counterparts. To give an example, in any major war that had thus far remained confined to the non-Soviet portion of Central Europe, the Soviets would probably be less provoked by NATO limited nuclear use in the theater than they would be by *any* sort of attack on the Soviet Union proper. As long as Soviet conventional forces were maintaining offensive momentum, Soviet decisionmakers might be prepared to countenance certain limited forms of NATO nuclear use, whether for "signalling" purposes or out of desperation, without responding in kind. (They would also, of course, remain under powerful compulsions to initiate the first *decisive* use of theater nuclear weapons in any situation where they felt that large-scale enemy escalation was imminent.) On the other hand, any NATO effort to carry the war directly to Soviet soil, even if largely symbolic, could entail a major change in the rules of the game in the Soviet view. Not only would this dramatically denote an end to superpower sanctuary status, it would also imply American willingness to risk unrestricted global war, thereby lifting whatever inhibitions the Soviets may have formerly felt against carrying out strategic strikes against the United States.

It follows from this logic that distinctions between "theater" and "strategic" war are meaningless to the Soviets. For them, war involving direct combat between U.S. and Soviet forces, whatever the operational setting, is indivisible. Any confrontation that even indirectly put basic Soviet security values at risk would be "strategic" by definition. The various "thresholds" of significance to the Soviets that might be crossed in the course of that conflict would accordingly relate not to changes in the intensity of violence or the weapons employed themselves so much as to how closely those events impinged on the most vital Soviet security sensitivities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WESTERN OPTIONS PLANNING

This idiosyncratic Soviet approach to the "thresholds" issue has consequences of great practical import for the United States. Reduced to its essentials, it means that most of the clever distinctions drawn by U.S. strategic theory among alternative levels of conflict would not be perceived as being equally salient by the Soviets in the heat and confusion of an ongoing war. There is no indication, for example, that Soviet war planners harbor anywhere near the concern over unintended collateral damage from nuclear strikes that we in the United States routinely worry about. True, they would seek to maximize economy of force--even in a war involving intercontinental nuclear exchanges--and would therefore strive to avoid gratuitous and unnecessary damage to non-military facilities. But it is highly unlikely that they would go out of their way to hobble their attacks against vital military targets through self-imposed restraints intended to "reassure" the United States that they were observing tacit "rules" of warfare aimed at controlling the escalation process. It is equally unlikely that they would be impressed by similar U.S. efforts to avoid civilian byproduct damage, particularly if those efforts involved attacks against military targets inside the Soviet Union. In such a case, Soviet decisionmakers would probably be far more influenced by the fact that such attacks had occurred than by any connotation of "restraint" the United States might seek to attach to them.

Even in a war that remained limited to theater confines, the Soviets would probably not be persuaded to observe restraint simply because the United States had studiously striven to avoid transgressing certain "thresholds"--such as the use of chemical or nuclear weapons--in the interest of inducing Soviet reciprocity. On the contrary, Soviet military commentators tend to reject the whole business of strategic "bargaining" with distaste as a bourgeois notion more appropriate to the marketplace than to the battlefield. For them, war has always ultimately involved political objectives. Any war in which they find themselves irretrievably caught will thus be fought in ways appropriate to the rapid achievement of those objectives rather



than in obeisance to any concern that Soviet operational choices be correctly "perceived" by the adversary.

Given this Soviet predisposition, efforts by the United States to play on Soviet perceptions by manipulating thresholds in order to "signal" U.S. intent could have precisely the opposite effect from that intended. For example, a single U.S. nuclear shot across the bow in Europe intended to "demonstrate resolve" might be interpreted by the Soviets as a demonstration of weakness instead: it could inadvertently telegraph an indication of underlying lack of U.S. willingness to use nuclear weapons in a truly decisive manner, as well as suggest an impression of American desperation that necessitated such a dramatic yet operationally futile gesture in the first place. Contrariwise, a single U.S. nuclear demonstration against an isolated target *within* the Soviet Union during the course of an intensifying European war might well be assessed not as the highly discriminate show of force it was intended to be, but rather as the precursor of a full-fledged intercontinental nuclear attack, requiring the appropriate Soviet preemptive response.

The gloomy side of this conclusion is that U.S. planners risk deluding themselves severely if they believe the Soviets will ever be susceptible to highly-refined variants of U.S. threshold avoidance or selective threshold crossing once the dice of war are rolled. But there is an optimistic side as well. The very tendency of the Soviets to see war in black-and-white terms once diplomacy has failed and major fighting has begun implies not only a Soviet determination to fight with unrestrained ferocity once events have foreclosed other alternatives, but also a powerful Soviet incentive to avoid becoming so committed in the first place if at all possible. Notwithstanding its impressive forces and combat-oriented doctrine, the Soviet military is beset by profound uncertainties that make it highly reluctant to seek out any test of its combat potential. These uncertainties include fear of the loss of initiative in war, the question of how Soviet forces would actually perform in combat, the extent of alliance solidarity the Soviets could count on once the pressure was on, and a whole

host of related apprehensions that raise serious doubt about the self-fulfilling character of Soviet doctrinal assurances regarding the attainability of victory.

The more we concentrate on the fine-grained details of various U.S.-Soviet conflict scenarios, the easier it is for us to forget that the main function of our forces is to deter rather than fight a war. For all its military robustness, the Soviet Union remains eminently deterrable. The key to such deterrence lies in sustained U.S. and NATO efforts to acquire the conceptual and hardware ingredients of a denial strategy aimed expressly at disabusing the Soviets of any confidence that their war plans could succeed if put to the test. Toward this end, conscientious but ill-informed proposals for no first use of nuclear weapons and related efforts to respect "thresholds" that do not figure in the Soviet strategic calculus are not only misdirected but potentially quite harmful to the security of the United States and its allies.

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Benjamin S. Lambeth

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